DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 176 302 CS 205 144

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TITLE Children and Sexist Literature: The Challenge of Critical Reading.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 15p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Attitudes; *Childrens Literature; *Critical Reading; Educational Research; Elementary Education; Females; *Reading Material Selection; *Role Perception; Sex Discrimination; *Sex Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

This review of research on sexism in children's literature considers alternatives to the dilemma of whether to discard children's books that contain stereotypes or to risk bestowing those stereotypes on today's children. Among the issues considered are: the effect of sex-role stereotyping on a child's level of intellectual functioning; the relationship of children's literature to sex-role stereotypes; the either negative or one-dimensional portrayal of women in nursery rhymes, folk and fairy tales; and literature written up to and during the period of a resurgence of feminism. Suggestions include an emphasis on self-definition for today's child and literature-related activities that can enhance critical awareness of sex-role stereotyping. (AEA)

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CHILDREN AND SEXIST LITERATURE:

THE CHALLENGE OF CRITICAL READING

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"'Accept the fact that this is a man's world and learn how to play the game gracefully.'"

-Up a Road Slowly, Irene Hunt (Follett, 1966)

"For the millionth time she was glad she wasn't a boy. It was all right for girls to be scared or silly or even ask dumb questions. Everybody just laughed and thought it was funny. But if anybody caught Joe asking a dumb question or even thought he was the littlest bit scared, he went red and purple and white."

-Miracles on Maple Hill, Virginia Sorenson (Harcourt, 1956)

"Midge Glass...turned out to be a good sport and smart, even if she is a girl...Midge doesn't giggle, and giggling is the main thing wrong with most girls."

-Henry Reed's Journey, Keith Robertson (Viking, 1963)

The roots of sex-role stereotypes begin in childhood. Sexism is taught to children by the way they are treated, the clothes they wear, the toys they are given, the activities in which they are permitted to engage, and the models of sex-roles presented by parents, books, television, and education. Children's literature itself is not immune from sex-role stereotypes; such stereotypes will continue so long as new generations are raised with the old ideas about sex-roles for men and women. Thus, we are faced with the dilemma of

either discarding "sexist" children's books, passing the rigid role models of the past to another generation, or searching for a third alternative. It is impractical and futile to purge literature for children of all references to stereotyped sex-roles. Indeed, that is neither the purpose of education or of literature. Rather, sexism in literature should be studied and analyzed by children in an historical perspective and used as a means to raise consciousness and enhance intellectual development.

Literature Defines a Child

It is known that sex-role development begins early. The establishment of gender identity, which often has been correlated with sex-role in our society, is a major developmental task starting at the age of two or three and is fairly solidified by the age of six. Furthermore, girls who mature within the rigid confines of a traditional sex-role stereotype may develop poor self-images. This lack of self-worth may affect their intellectual functioning and achievement.

Matina S. Horner (1972) discussed achievement-related conflicts in women. She argued that women have a motive to avoid success because of the expected undesirable consequence of loss of femininity. Our societal stereotypes often have made competition, independence, competence, and intellectual achievement, prerequisites for success, incompatible with the female ideal. Rather, achievement for women, according to Jo Freedman (1970), is directed toward marriage as the route to success.

Eleanor Maccoby (1966) further probed the effect of sex-role

stereotyping on children's level of intellectual functioning. She found passive and dependent children of both sexes to perform poorly on intellectual tasks while children who take initiative and are self-assertive to excel in such thinking. She also cited studies (the Fels Long Study; Barron, 1957; MacKinnon, 1962; and Bieri, 1960) that show that cross-sex-typing (the sharing of interests and activities "normally characteristic of the opposite sex") is associated with analytic thinking, creativity, and high general intelligence. According to these studies, then, it would be beneficial for both boys and girls to be more flexible in their roles.

But what happens to those girls who do try to cross the sex-role barrier? Maccoby (1963) believes that they pay a price in anxiety which results in lack of productivity. Horner (1972) finds this price paid in frustration, self-hatred, bitterness and confusion, a high emotional toll.

How do sex-role stereotypes begin and what is their relationship to children's literature? The social-learning theory of Walter Mischel (1966) postulates that the emergence of sex-roles is largely derived from the environment. He asserts that "observational learning from live and symbolic models (i.e., films, television, and books) is the first step in the acquisition of sex-typed behavior." (This is behavior that has varying consequences depending on the sex of the performer.) It can be assumed that children's books reflect societal values, portraying images of children and their potential as adults. Thus, literature, as part of environment, is thought to play a meaningful role in a child's sex-role development.

Society Defines Literature

If this is true, clearly children's literature has done little to help children create stereotype-free roles for themselves. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated the grim reality of this fact. The role of the female, in particular, is usually either neglected or cast as a one-dimensional aid to the real action performed by males. (The simple lack of females in children's books indicates something about their importance.) Some books are even more blatant in moralizing on the "proper" roles for boys and girls.

Beginning with traditional literature, sexism abounds in nursery rhymes. Ardell Nadesan (1974) conducted a study of The Real Mother Goose. The rhymes portray women mostly as wives or mothers, some negatively as in:

"Needles and pins, needles and pins,
When a man marries, his trouble begins."

The occupations of men in the rhymes include king, wise man, doctor, merchant, blacksmith, and hunter. Women's occupations are queen and milking maid.

A critique by Dan Donlan (1972) found that many rhymes paint a picture of women as "eccentric" or "befuddled." He cited such rhymes as "Old Mother Goose" flying through the air on a gander, "The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe" who didn't know what to do about all her children, and "Old Mother Hubbard," whose dog seems the master of the situation. (However, it is important to note here that Mother Goose rhymes, which are hundreds of years old, cannot be viewed literally since the original meanings were probably political

satire, leaving open to question the appropriateness of using such rhymes with very young children unless one values the rhythm of the language and accepts the incomprehensibility of the words.)

Donlan proceeded to analyze the female image portrayed in folk and fairy tales. He saw some grandmothers, such as Little Red Riding Hood's, as "imperceptive" when confronted with danger. A competent character, such as a witch, is evil and ugly. The domineering housewife, such as in "The Fishermen and His Wife," or the cruel stepmother, of such as Cinderella, are defeated. Female heroines in fairy tales abound, though they usually are dependent on men to rescue them from danger, such as Snow White or Sleeping Beauty.

Marcia R. Lieberman (1972) also examined fairy tales for the female image. She found a predominant theme in the competition of women on the basis of physical appearance, such as in "Cinderella" or "Snow White," with the prize being marriage, usually to a male of great power or wealth. Often the one chosen is also the most passive. The one image of a good female with power is the fairy godmother.

Weitzman, et.al. (1972) studied sex-roles as depicted in picture books, concentrating their analysis on the eighteen Caldecott winners and runners-up of the five-year period just prior to their survey. They found that women simply are not pictured in many of these books. Though they comprise 51 percent of the population, only 23 females are pictured as compared to 261 males. Of the titles, the ratio is eight to three, men and women named. The content of the books shows one-third with no women included.

The books portray boys to be active, involved in adventure, leading, and independent, primarily in outdoor settings. Girls are

passive, quiet, dependent, and attempting to please or help brothers and fathers, usually in indoor situations. (Nilsen's study [1971] noted how often females are pictured watching the action from doorways and windows.) As adults, women are shown in activities similar to the girls, as wives and mothers. There are no women shown in professions, and, this study pointed out, even mothers aren't presented realistically and as active as many are. Females often achieve their status in these books as wives, daughters, or mothers of important men. It is the men, after all, who fill the roles such as king, storekeeper, policeman, judge, or storyteller. Similar findings resulted from other studies by John Stewig and Margaret Higgs (1973) and Alleen Pace Nilsen (1971).

Stewig and Higgs also examined the occupational discrepancy more closely in both award and non-award picture books. Eighty-three percent of the women are portrayed in homemaking roles (cooking, watching child, shopping, etc.) with the remaining seventeen percent divided among fourteen occupations, teacher and maid being the most prevalent. This is clearly unrealistic in light of the fact that women comprise some forty percent of all jobholders at any one time. Men, on the other hand, are depicted in these books in forty-one professional roles and are seldom shown involved in household tasks.

So the statistics are grim, but have they improved with the resurgence of feminism? Judith Stevinson Hillman (1974) surveyed sixty books in two periods of children's literature, 1930-1940 and 1965-1974. She found males to hold nearly eighty percent of the

occupations, something that did not change significantly. The main difference she discovered is in behavior and emotion, with females showing more vocal aggressiveness, curiosity, and anger. Thus, she saw females adopting more "masculine" characteristics, but found men still locked into the "strong" masculine role. She concluded that there does seem to be a liberalizing of sex-role expectations, primarily for women.

The Feminists on Children's Media (1971) discovered books among winners of the Newbery Award and those recommended by the American Library Association and/or the Child Study Association featuring almost superhuman females. There are too few, however, with "women who simply function very well and freely wherever they choose - or are forced - to apply their abilities."

Self-Definition for Today's Child

Clearly, then, the search must be made to find new ways to educate tomorrow's women and men. It is, as Patricia Minuchin (1972) stated, "part of a more general search for optimal forms and qualities of schooling." She listed four educational goals essential to the development of capable human beings: (1) an atmosphere that minimizes stereotypes and encourages variety and exploration of alternatives; (2) exposure to a variety of experiences, adult role models, and ways of thinking; (3) teaching of a problem-solving, decision-making approach to such experiences; and (4) the enhancement of the child's knowledge about him/herself and how he/she differs from others.

Thus far, the implications of sex-role stereotyping for child

development, the image of the female as it exists in much of children's literature, and some points to consider about education that may help to change the shape of girls' self-perception have been examined. Now the questions need to be asked: what do we do with children's books that contain sexist references? How do they mesh with non-sexist education?

There are groups such as the Council on Interracial Books for Children who, in their 1976 book, Human (and Anti-Human) Values in Children's Books, have expanded their vigilante attitude to include not only racism, but sexism, ageism, materialism, conformism, individualism, and escapism. An editorial in School Library Journal (November 1976) pointed out that, according to CIBC criteria, The Tale of Peter Rabbit could be considered sexist, ageist, materialist, conformist, escapist, and racist by omission. Lillian Gerhart, the editor, called for the use of common sense, stating that there is "nothing new in censorship whether it comes from the Left or the Right." Or, as is stated in Censorship, a guide prepared by Lou Willett Stanek (1976), "it is in the public interest to offer the widest variety of views and opinions, including unorthodox and controversial ideas, and that a book should be judged on its intrinsic merit, regardless of the particular political or social viewpoint the author may be espousing." (It is important to add that a book should be evaluated as a whole.) A democratic society such as ours is based upon the free discussion of ideas, which may be, at times, dangerous. Suppression, on the other hand, is fatal to democracy, for, ideas, discussed in an open forum,

stand or fall on their own merit.

This does not mean that persons should be forced to read a book. Rather, they should make their own choices, a skill that requires the ability to think and reason critically. As previously mentioned, one of the goals of education should be to teach such decision-making skills. After all, the purpose of literature is not to present an ideal picture of life. In fact, the stereotyped book can actually aid intellectual functioning as much or more than those devoid of all sexism. They can be used to increase critical thinking. It is obvious, then, that children should choose their own books to read and be encouraged to question and discuss what they have read. Out of such consciousness-raising arises the development of criteria or standards, a basic tool in judging the merit of a book. Many of the criteria to be used in evaluating literature from a feminist perspective are common to those used to judge a book on its literary merit. As Gersoni-Stavn (1974) stated, "feminist criticism, to be enduring, must be humanistic criticism." Aesthetic standards should not be sacrificed.

Critical Reading and Self-Definition

Accordingly, the following questions/criteria are proposed to stimulate critical awareness. (1) Are the major characters, including females, developed as realistic beings who are memorable as well as believable? (Minor characters in a book need not be fully rounded for the literary purposes of the story.) (2) Do the characters, including females, develop logically? (3) Do the females seem to exist only because the author assumes that men will have to be in contact with them

at times? (4) Are strong females only portrayed under extraordinary circumstances and in unusual situations (i.e., science fiction, mysteries, desert island settings, etc.)? (5) Does the author so extoll the qualities of a capable female in ordinary settings as to make her seem strange? (6) Is an authorial tone or statement used to condone sexist references existing in a story? (Such ideas may have validity when expressed through a character, though they still merit discussion.) (7) Does the book moralize about sex stereotypes? (8) While some books to which a child is exposed may be "sexist," are they balanced by others that reflect different opinions? (For example: Island of the Blue Dolphins, Scott O'Dell, Houghton Mifflin, 1960; Queenie Peavy, Robert Burch, Viking, 1966; Harriet the Spy, Louise Fitzhugh, Harper and Row, 1964; and Julie of the Wolves, Jean George, Harper and Row, 1972.)

Literature-related activities that can enhance critical awareness of sex-role stereotyping may include: (1) discussing issues that are raised in a story; (2) comparing the number of stories featuring boys with those featuring girls; (3) discussing how a story is influenced by the period of history or culture in which it is set or from which it comes; and (4) re-writing and/or role-playing a story with male and female roles reversed and discussing the results.

Much of the literature now available for children is rife with stereotyped allusions and models, reflecting the sexist tradition of our culture. As lifestyles change, so, too, will literature. Even so, many older books have literary merit. They should not be discarded, but rather read, re-read, discussed, and analyzed from an historical perspective. Such study by children can, indeed, increase awareness,

aid critical thinking and intellectual development, and combat sex-role stereotypes in books and in society.

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